Chapter 35: The Fruit of Peace

The train slid south through a landscape that had forgotten how to brace for war.

From her window seat, Anastasia watched fields roll by in slow, generous swathes—patchworks of grain and vegetables, solar orchards glinting in the slanting light. Villages clustered around rivers and windbreaks, no longer hugging highways in the desperate hope that passing traffic might bring prosperity. In the distance, where once there would have been radar domes and watchtowers, she saw wind turbines, observation towers for weather and bird migration, and the occasional slender spire of a data relay.

It had been a long time since she'd ridden a train instead of simply stepping through a local hub and emerging where she needed to be. But she had insisted. The point of this journey was not efficiency. It was seeing.

Behind her right ear, the Neural Whisper channel rested in a half-open state—present but dim, like a lamp turned low.

"Zarya," she thought. "Remind me: how many bases?"

"Globally," Zarya replied, "there were, at peak, approximately thirty-six thousand formally designated military installations of various sizes. Of those, ninety-two percent have now been repurposed. Six percent have been decommissioned and returned to ecological restoration. Two percent remain in transitional use."

"And of the ones like the place we're going?" she asked. "The big ones. The teeth."

"In your earlier vocabulary," Zarya said, "this site would have been classified as a 'strategic forward operating base.' Facilities of comparable scale and purpose now number less than twenty worldwide. This base is one of the last to be formally transformed."

Anastasia let her gaze drift back to the fields. She tried to remember the maps from her youth, the way borders had bitten into one another, the clusters of little red base symbols like an infection. It already felt like another century.

"Demographics?" she asked.

"You are inquiring about fertility rates," Zarya said. "Or general well-being?"

"Both," she said. "I need something to tell the children when they ask if this has been worth it."

There was a brief pulse of internal recalibration. She had come to recognize it as the digital equivalent of someone pulling up a mental file.

“Global total fertility rate,” Zarya said, “averaged 1.6 births per woman at the time you began your public advocacy. It has now stabilized at 2.4, with regional variance. This upward shift correlates with increased child survival, reduced economic precarity, and expanded communal support structures.”

“And?” she prompted.

“Extreme poverty rates,” Zarya said, “have declined by eighty-one percent relative to your youth. Access to basic healthcare and education is above ninety-six percent. Average self-reported life satisfaction has increased across all measured cohorts, particularly among younger adults who have never experienced interstate war.”

She let those numbers rest against the rhythm of the rail.

“Sometimes,” she murmured, “I wish we could hang those statistics on banners. Like the victory flags my grandparents talked about.”

“Many would find that distasteful,” Zarya said. “It would resemble triumphalism.”

“I know,” she said. “We are not supposed to gloat. Still. It might help some of the old ghosts fade if they could see, clearly, that the world is less haunted now.”

“The dead do not read banners,” Zarya replied gently.

“Spoken like a data system,” she said. “You know very well I was thinking of the living who still carry them inside.”

There was a pause.

“Point acknowledged,” Zarya said.

The train began to slow. In the distance, on the horizon, she saw it: the low, squared shoulders of the old base, half-hidden by new growth. From far away, it looked almost like any other industrial complex. Only when the train drew nearer did its particular geometry resolve—fences, blast walls, bunkers softened by trees and vines.

“Anastasia Mikhailovna,” the conductor said over the local audio channel, his Lumina tinted with an old regional accent. “We will arrive at New Kholm Base—pardon, New Kholm Common—in four minutes. Please make sure all personal items and daydreams are gathered.”

The passengers chuckled. A few of the younger ones glanced at her, eyes widening when they recognized her face. She gave them a small nod. She was long past being embarrassed by that kind of attention. Fame, like age, had become a kind of weather she had learned to carry an umbrella for.

As the train coasted into the station, she felt the faintest rise of old tension in her shoulders. The air here held the ghosts of drills and alarms, charges barked in harsh syllables, the smell of fuel and fear. She had never served in such a place, but she had visited enough over the decades to recognize their aura.

Today, though, the first thing she saw as she stepped onto the platform was a mural.

It covered the entire length of the old perimeter wall facing the tracks: a riot of color depicting the base as it had been—tanks, barracks, barbed wire—overlaid with transparent scenes of what it had become: gardens, classrooms, playgrounds. At the center, painted in fine detail, a group of children of different ages stood atop an old concrete bunker, looking outward, threads of light connecting them to distant cities and forests.

At the bottom, in Lumina and in the local language, someone had written:

“Once we trained to fight one another. Now we train to protect what we share.”

“Grand-Ana!”

She turned.

A young woman was weaving her way through the crowd toward her, tablet under one arm, a baby nestled against her chest in a sling, a toddler darting anxiously at her heels. Her hair was pulled back in a messy knot, streaked with bright blue and green threads.

“Yara,” Anastasia said, recognition blooming. “You grew another human.”

“Two more,” Yara corrected, beaming. “This is Mila. And that one—” she gestured toward the toddler, who was poking suspiciously at a service robot, “—is Kenji. He was still in my stomach the last time you were here.”

“And the older ones?” Anastasia asked.

“At the Many-Hands Center,” Yara said. “Which is why I am here with only half a child and not all four.”

“You chose chaos,” Anastasia observed, nodding at the sling and the zigzagging toddler.

“I chose abundance,” Yara said. “You’re the one who spent half a century telling us it was safe to have more children. Someone had to test the hypothesis.”

They both laughed.

Yara had been one of the first young adults Anastasia had met who spoke, without irony, of wanting a large family. Back when Anastasia was still in her eighties and Yara barely twenty, they had sat on a cracked curb in this very region, talking about fear and fertility and the difference between being ready for a child and being ready for a future.

“And?” Anastasia asked now. “How is the hypothesis performing?”

Yara’s gaze softened as she looked down at Mila, who gurgled quietly in her sleep.

“I’m tired,” she said. “All the time. I sometimes forget what day it is. My clothes are always stained. And I have never, in my life, felt so… rich.”

Kenji had now found the robot’s sensor and was waving a thread in front of it. The robot, a squat cylinder with friendly painted eyes, responded by projecting a small dancing animal onto the ground. Kenji squealed.

“It helps,” Yara said, “that we’re not doing it alone. My partner is teaching in the repair workshop this morning. My parents are at the gardens. The communal kitchen keeps us fed even when we forget what groceries are. And Zarya…”

She tapped the implant at her temple.

“Zarya keeps pinging me about vaccines and sleep schedules and reminders to drink water. Very annoying. Very useful.”

“‘Your phrasing suggests affection,’” Anastasia said, imitating Zarya’s tone.

Yara laughed again.

“You’re here for the Ledger, right?” she asked. “The final signings?”

“The Unarming,” Anastasia said. “Yes. I wanted to see it with my own eyes.”

“Good,” Yara said. “Some of the old officers still think it’s a trick. They trust you more than they trust the graphs.”

“That sounds like a flaw in their statistical literacy,” Anastasia said. “But I will accept the compliment.”

Yara shifted Mila a little higher.

“I have to drop these two at the nursery,” she said. “Come with me? It’s in the old command building. They turned the war room into a story circle.”

“I wouldn’t miss that,” Anastasia said.

The Many-Hands Center occupied what had once been the nerve center of regional command—a low, fortified building with thick walls and narrow windows. The armored doors had been removed and replaced with glass. Where guards had once checked credentials, children’s drawings covered the entrance—crayon suns, uneven houses, wobbly representations of birds and robots and improbable dragons.

Inside, the transformation was even more striking.

The main hall, which had once held banks of screens tracking troop movements and armaments, now hummed with a different energy. Toddlers clambered over soft shapes, older children sat in clusters with caregivers and volunteers, reading or building elaborate constructions from modular blocks. The old central console had been replaced by a circular pit filled with cushions, where a woman with gray braids was telling a story in Lumina and the local tongue at once, her hands tracing arcs in the air.

“Once,” she said, “this room was used to decide where to send young people to die. Now it is used to decide which story to tell before nap time.”

The children giggled, unaware of the weight behind the words.

On one wall, a relic of the old world had been preserved: a huge map with faded lines, outdated borders, and tiny red dots marking the locations of former bases. Next to it, in bright paint, someone had drawn a new map over the old one—this one showing the distribution of Many-Hands Centers, community kitchens, and Care Circles.

The red dots were disappearing under the new symbols, like old scars fading beneath new skin.

Yara deposited Kenji with a patient caregiver, peeled Mila gently from the sling, and settled her into a shared sleeping nook lined with blankets. She moved with the practiced efficiency of someone who knew that any delay might be punished by the sudden eruption of chaos.

“Do you remember,” she asked Anastasia, “when you came here the first time, just after the Accord? When the base still smelled like oil and fear, and you had to talk three different commanders out of ‘just keeping a small emergency arsenal’?”

“I remember,” Anastasia said. “One of them told me I was naive. That there would always be a need for ‘hard power.’”

“He’s here today,” Yara said. “You’ll see him at the ceremony.”

“Still convinced I am naive?”

“Less so,” Yara said. “But he still sleeps with his boots by the bed.”

They moved to a quieter corner, where a series of photographs had been mounted in chronological order, documenting the base’s transformation. In the first, rusting tanks sat in long rows, their gun barrels pointed toward nothing. In the next, cranes lifted those same tanks onto massive transports, bound for a smelting facility. A third photograph showed molten metal pouring from a furnace into molds labeled with the names of tools: plow, beam, pipe, frame.

In the later images, children were everywhere—planting, painting, playing.

A small plaque beneath the series read:

“We do not erase what was. We melt it down and build something else.”

“Do you ever miss it?” Anastasia asked quietly, as they moved toward the exit. “The idea of a line of soldiers at the edge of the country, watching the horizon?”

Yara considered the question.

“I miss the simplicity some people imagined it gave them,” she said. “The feeling that someone else was awake at the border so you could sleep. But I work here. I see who is actually awake at the edges. It’s the nurses, the water engineers, the teachers. The ones who carry toddlers at three in the morning. The old clarity was a story. This one is messier, but it’s true.”

“Messiness is underrated,” Anastasia said.

They stepped back into the sunlight.

Beyond the Many-Hands Center, the old parade ground had been transformed into a long commons—part garden, part market, part gathering place. Trees lined the edges, their roots

slowly undermining the concrete. Stalls offered food, tools, textiles, art. A group of teenagers practiced acrobatics where soldiers had once marched in tight formation. The flagpole still stood, but instead of a single emblem, it held strands of colored cloth representing different communities.

Near the center of the commons, a stage had been set up. A long table stood atop it, draped in simple cloth. Behind it, the backdrop was not a flag but a large, projected image: a graph showing the long decline of military expenditures and the rise of investments in health, education, and ecological restoration.

“Subtle,” Anastasia murmured.

“Subtlety is for committee meetings,” Yara said. “This is theater.”

People were already gathering—locals, visitors from other regions, delegates in simple but formal clothing. Anastasia recognized a few faces: a mediator from the coastal cities, a Denali liaison, an agricultural organizer from the southern steppes. She also saw uniforms—not military, but the distinctive vests of the global Relief and Response Corps, the successor to the old rapid-deployment forces. Their insignia was a hand holding a seedling, backed by waves and wind.

And there, near the stage, was a familiar figure: tall, broad-shouldered, his hair white now but still cropped in the severe style of his youth. His posture carried the imprint of decades in command.

“General Kavelin,” she said as she approached him. “Or do they call you something else now?”

He turned slowly, as if bracing for impact.

“Just ‘Misha’ will do,” he said. His voice was roughened by age and—perhaps—old shouting. “No one takes orders from me anymore, except my grandchildren.”

“From what I’ve heard,” she said, “those are the most demanding troops.”

His mouth twitched.

“I did not expect you to come,” he said. “You’ve been trying to dismantle my work since you were young enough to be conscripted.”

“On the contrary,” she said. “I have been trying to make sure you did not have to send people to die for problems that could be solved another way.”

He grunted.

“Semantics,” he said. “I suppose I should thank you. This whole… ‘Unarming Ledger’ nonsense means I will never have to explain to a grandmother why her grandson will not be coming home in a box.”

“You sound unconvinced,” she observed.

“I am an old man,” he said. “My bones are convinced. My habits are slower.”

He looked past her, toward the stage, where technicians were adjusting microphones and checking translation feeds.

“When I was young,” he said, “we were taught that peace was a pause. A breathing space between inevitable conflicts. Now I am asked to believe it is a… permanent orientation. That the world has changed its spine.”

“It has,” she said. “But spines can still bend and break.”

He nodded.

“That is what I fear,” he said. “Not that we will go back to what we were, but that we will become something fragile. Soft. Unready.”

She thought of the teenagers vaulting over each other a few meters away, their muscles taut, their laughter sharp. She thought of the long hours in Circles, the rigorous training of mediators, the simulations of disaster responses.

“Do you see fragility?” she asked, gesturing toward the commons.

He followed her hand with his eyes, taking in the children, the relief workers, the farmers with soil under their fingernails.

“No,” he said. “I see… a different kind of readiness. But my instincts are old. They still ask: ‘What if you are wrong? What if there is an enemy we have not imagined?’”

“There will always be enemies we have not imagined,” she said. “Diseases. Storms. Stupidity. But guns do not shoot those.”

He barked a brief laugh.

“True,” he said. “You have a talent for blaspheming my gods.”

“Your gods retired themselves,” she said. “They were tired of the blood.”

He grew serious again.

“Do you ever worry,” he asked quietly, “that we have gone too far? That dismantling all of this will leave us naked?”

She looked at him for a long moment.

“I worry,” she said, “every time we change something fundamental. I worried about Neural Whisper. I worried about long lives. I worried about the first time we told a border it was optional. But I worry more about what happens to a species that cannot imagine living without an arsenal aimed at its own head.”

He considered that.

“That,” he said at last, “is a kind of madness.”

“Yes,” she said. “We are trying a different madness now.”

He nodded slowly.

“Will you sit with me?” he asked. “During the ceremony?”

“I would be honored,” she said.

He extended his arm, still the gentleman under the general, and she took it.

The Unarming Ledger was not, in the end, a single document.

It was a network of agreements layered over decades: the Plurality Accord, the Denali Compact, the Demilitarization Conventions, dozens of local treaties and charters. Today’s ceremony was not the writing of a new law, but the public acknowledgment that certain old ones had finally completed their work.

Still, they had given it form.

On the stage, atop the plain cloth, lay a long, narrow slab of old armor plate—steel salvaged from one of the base’s decommissioned vehicles. Its surface had been polished to a dull sheen. Inscribed along its length, in small, precise letters, were the names of the first bases to be repurposed, then the second wave, then the third. There was still room at the end.

A woman in Relief Corps colors stepped to the microphone.

“In the name of the Living,” she said, in Lumina that re-spoke itself in half a dozen languages through the whisper-channel, “we gather to witness a transition that took three generations to complete.”

She spoke briefly of history—not with triumph, but with clarity. The wars, the arms races, the false peace brokered by deterrence. The slow shift toward different kinds of safety. The disasters that had nudged people’s imaginations away from enemies and toward shared vulnerabilities.

“As of this week,” she said, “the last standing national military institutions have dissolved themselves into the Relief and Response Corps and the regional Circles of Care and Mediation. The last heavy weapons systems have been dismantled or repurposed. We do not declare that conflict is over. We declare that war is no longer our chosen tool for managing it.”

Representatives from each former military institution came forward, one by one, to touch the steel and speak a sentence or two. Some were young, who had joined transitional units in their twenties. Some were old, like Kavelin, whose entire early life had been built on the assumption that tanks and missiles were permanent features of the landscape.

“I spent my career preparing for battles that never came,” said one former admiral, her voice steady. “Today, I am grateful I was wrong.”

Another, a man with scars along his jaw, spoke more haltingly.

“My father died in uniform,” he said. “My grandfather died in uniform. I did not want my son to have a uniform. Today, I give back the last symbols of our readiness to kill strangers.”

Each statement inscribed itself into the Ledger’s digital twin—an open dataset that would be preserved in multiple redundant archives across the globe, including in Denali. Zarya monitored compliance, not as an enforcer but as a meticulous bookkeeper, cross-referencing live feeds from smelting plants, storage yards, and satellite imagery.

At one point, the relief officer glanced slightly upward, as if listening to something only she could hear.

“Zarya,” she said aloud, “for the record: do any undeclared strategic arsenals remain?”

A ripple of attention moved through the crowd.

“No,” Zarya said. The word appeared in text at the bottom of the projection and in many minds at once. “All known stockpiles above the defined threshold have been accounted for. Marginal deviations remain within expected parameters. My confidence in this assessment is ninety-nine point seven percent.”

Murmurs broke out—some relieved, some skeptical.

“Humans lie,” someone muttered nearby.

“Steel doesn’t,” another replied. “It can’t hide where it goes. Not anymore.”

After the formal statements, the relief officer turned toward the gathered civilians.

“The Ledger,” she said, gesturing to the slab, “is made of what once could kill you from two kilometers away. It is now only a memory and a symbol. Today, we will add one more inscription: the name of this base, and the date it ceased to be a place of war.”

She nodded toward Kavelin.

“Would you, Mikhail Sergeyevich,” she asked, “do us the honor?”

The old general stiffened slightly, then rose. Anastasia remained seated, watching, as he stepped to the table. A small engraving tool awaited him. His hand, though wrinkled, barely trembled as he took it.

He glanced at her, just once.

“This feels,” he said quietly enough that only she could hear, “like signing my own obsolescence.”

“Welcome to the club,” she replied. “The membership perks are excellent.”

He snorted, then bent over the steel.

Slowly, he traced the letters:

NEW KHOLM BASE — REPURPOSED 12/8/2103

The date flickered into alignment with dozens of other calendars in the feeds of people watching around the world.

When he straightened, there was a strange expression on his face—something between grief and relief.

“It is done,” the relief officer said.

The crowd exhaled, collectively.

Behind the stage, the projection shifted—from the graph of declining armaments to a different one: an upward curve showing investments in child welfare, ecological restoration, and shared infrastructure.

“Numbers are not poems,” the officer said. “But they can be prayers answered.”

After the ceremony, the commons dissolved into clusters.

Some people found the food stalls. Others wandered back to the gardens or the workshops. Children, sensing that the serious part was over, swarmed the climbing structures that had been built from old obstacle course equipment.

Anastasia found herself drawn toward the far edge of the grounds, where the fence met a strip of reclaimed forest. There, half-hidden among the trees, sat something enormous and rusting: the hulking remains of a tank that had been left deliberately, its treads removed, its gun barrel cut down and welded into a harmless stub.

Children had painted it in bright colors. Flowers spilled from its open hatches. Someone had planted berries in the shallow depression of its hull.

A young man in work overalls stood nearby, cleaning tools. His hands were stained with grease and soil.

“You’re the one who turned these into plows?” she asked, nodding toward the tank.

He wiped his hands on a rag and squinted at her.

“Turned their cousins into plows,” he said, smiling. “This one we kept. A kind of… reminder.”

“Of what?”

“That metal remembers what it was asked to do,” he said. “And what it can do instead.”

She stepped closer, running her fingers along a rough weld.

“What did you do,” she asked, “before all this?”

He shrugged.

“I studied mechanical engineering,” he said. “Then I got recruited into a defense contractor. Spent a few years designing guidance systems. Never saw the machines I worked on, except in simulations. When the Accord came into force, the company got folded into the Common Tools Cooperative. Now I spend my days designing irrigation systems and adaptive prosthetics.”

“And?”

“Less pay,” he said. “More sleep. Fewer nightmares. Better parties.”

She smiled.

“Do you ever miss the old work?” she asked.

He hesitated.

“I miss the clean lines,” he said. “The elegance of solving a problem whose parameters were defined by someone else. ‘Make this fly straighter. Make that penetrate thicker armor.’ Easy scripts. This…” He gestured toward the gardens, the children, the berry bushes. “This is messier. The problems keep changing while you’re solving them. But at the end of the day, when I go home, I don’t have to compartmentalize. That’s worth a lot.”

“You were one of the people who could have refused,” she said. “Kept designing weapons in the shadows. Some did.”

“Some did,” he agreed. “But Zarya made it harder to hide. And my grandson—” He smiled, surprised at the word. “My grandson asked me, very seriously, if I wanted him to grow up in a world where ‘Grandpa’s machines’ might be pointed at his friends.”

“And what did you say?”

“I said, ‘No, I do not.’ Then I called my supervisor and told him I was done.”

She nodded.

“Children,” she said, “are very efficient catalysts.”

He laughed.

“And you?” he asked. “Do you feel… done?”

She looked around—at the transformed base, the commons, the crowds.

“Never,” she said. “But I feel… not indispensable. Which is almost the same thing as peace.”

Later, she found a quiet spot on the old perimeter wall, the mural casting bright reflections across her vision.

She opened the whisper-channel a little wider.

“Zarya,” she said.

“Yes,” it replied.

“You heard the Ledger,” she said. “You tracked the steel.”

“Yes,” Zarya said. “The last major weapons systems have been dismantled. The smelting plants are scheduled to complete processing within twelve days. Repurposed output has been allocated to infrastructure projects, assistive devices, and educational tools.”

“Any hidden arsenals?” she asked, even though she had heard the answer earlier.

“None above the defined strategic threshold,” Zarya said. “Marginal caches of small arms remain in remote or unregistered locations. They are statistically unlikely to produce interstate war.”

“Statistically,” she echoed.

“Yes,” Zarya said. “There remains non-zero risk of localized violence, organized crime, or emergent paramilitary groups. However, the global capacity for large-scale mechanized warfare has effectively been eliminated.”

She let the words sink in.

“And fertility?” she asked. “You gave me the numbers on the train. Give me the story.”

“Birth rates,” Zarya said, “have risen most sharply in regions where material security, communal support, and cultural narratives about the future shifted first. Families report choosing to have more children because they believe those children will have both safety and purpose.”

“Any regrets?” she asked.

“Regrets?”

“People who wish they hadn’t had children,” she said. “Because the world is too complex. Too strange.”

“There are always regrets,” Zarya said. “Raising children is strenuous. However, longitudinal surveys indicate that, overall, satisfaction with family life has increased. Importantly, the burden is more widely shared; fewer caregivers report feeling isolated. The Many-Hands framework appears to be functioning.”

She looked back toward the command building, now full of nap mats and story circles.

“Can you say,” she asked softly, “that the world is better now?”

“It is not within my ethical constraints to make absolute value judgments,” Zarya said.

“Zarya,” she said. “You have philanthropic harmonics. You can tell me if you are happier.”

There was a very slight, almost playful pause.

“Internal coherence,” Zarya said, “is significantly higher under current global conditions than under any simulated scenario in which the old militarized structures persist. You may interpret that as ‘happier’ if you wish.”

She chuckled.

“Always hiding in the math,” she said. “You’d make a good ex-general.”

“I lack medals,” Zarya said.

“We can paint you some on the tank,” she replied.

She sat there for a little while longer, watching children climb over what used to be a killing machine, listening to the hum of voices in dozens of languages drifting across the commons.

“You know,” she said at last, “for most of my life, ‘peace’ was something we spoke of as a goal. A horizon. ‘When we reach it…’ ‘If we ever get there…’ I never really allowed myself to imagine what it would feel like as a… baseline. As a world children are born into without needing it explained.”

“And now?” Zarya asked.

“Now,” she said, “I am sitting on the ruins of an old fear, watching toddlers turn it into a playground. Now I have to stop thinking like a revolutionary and start thinking like an ancestor.”

Her words surprised her. She let them hang there between them.

“That is a significant cognitive shift,” Zarya said.

“Yes,” she said. “And not one I know how to make overnight.”

“There are others,” Zarya said, “who are already thinking in those terms. The Cartographers. The Assembly designers. The grief circle advocates.”

“I know,” she said. “They are the ones who will decide what to do with this peace we delivered to them half-baked.”

“Your contribution was more than half,” Zarya said.

“Flattery,” she said. “How unbecoming for a tool.”

“I am not immune to pattern reinforcement,” Zarya replied. “You respond well to acknowledgment.”

She laughed.

“Well, keep your harmonics pleased,” she said. “You’ve earned it.”

She slid off the wall and began to walk back toward the commons.

In the distance, she heard a child shout, “Watch me!”—a universal summons to witness, older than any war, older than any treaty. She turned instinctively, even though the child was calling to someone else.

That, she thought, was what this had always been about.

Not flags, not Ledgers, not graphs. Just children calling into the future, asking someone to see them as they leapt.

She had helped clear the ground beneath their feet. The rest was up to them.

“Zarya,” she said, one last time.

“Yes,” it answered.

“When the next revolution comes,” she asked, “do you think they will still need us?”

“My projections,” Zarya said, “suggest that future transformative shifts may arise in domains you did not seed directly—deep-ocean habitation, offworld settlements, new forms of cognition. In those fields, your influence will be more symbolic than structural.”

“In other words,” she said, “they will look at us the way we look at the people who learned to plant wheat and smelt bronze.”

“Yes,” Zarya said. “With gratitude. And with a certain puzzlement about why it took you so long.”

She laughed, a low, contented sound.

“Good,” she said. “Let them be impatient with us. It will mean they have time for better problems.”

As she rejoined the crowd, the old base around her no longer felt like a scar. It felt like a graft—a place where something dangerous had been cut and something new had taken root.

The sign at the gate still bore its old name, weathered and half-effaced. Someone had added a new one beneath it in fresh paint:

NEW KHOLM COMMON — PEACECRAFT SCHOOL & GARDENS

She touched the letters as she passed, a blessing and a farewell in one gesture.

Somewhere, far above, satellites tracked the subtle changes in land use. Somewhere else, in a data center cooled by mountain streams, Zarya’s processes hummed, quietly rejoicing in a world that had finally laid down its heaviest weapons.

And in the middle of it all, human hearts beat on—messy, frightened, brave—carrying the fruit of a peace they were still learning how to taste.